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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a rationale for teaching study skills to students with learning disabilities, a flexible study skills model, and suggestions for implementing the model. Students with learning disabilities are seen as capable of learning study skills but require specific instruction and practice and need teachers who understand learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses. The flexible study skills model begins with the development of organization strategies, including organization of materials, homework, and long-term assignments; time planning on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis; and organization of study space. The model then presents main idea, notetaking, and summarizing skills which can be taught and practiced in grades 4 through high school. These basic skills then become the foundation for building textbook, test-preparation, and test-taking skills. (DB)

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A CALL FOR MORE STUDY SKILLS INSTRUCTION

by Joan Sedita, M.Ed.

The term "metacognition" is used in education to describe the learning process. It means transcending cognition, or more simply put, thinking about thinking. Study skills instruction develops in students a metacognitive approach to school - they learn how to learn. Students need to go beyond completing an assignment and think about how they complete it. They need to be aware of the process they follow and steps they take when pre-reading a textbook, taking notes in class, or answering an essay question on a test.

To most people, teaching basic skills means the 3 R's: Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic. I believe, however, that study skills are an essential component of basic skills which for too long has been neglected. I have devoted a significant portion of my twenty years work in the field of learning disabilities to developing study skills curriculums and instructional material, and to training educators and parents how to teach study skills. Study skills instruction benefits all students, but it is crucial to students who have learning disabilities.

WHAT ARE STUDY SKILLS, AND WHY DO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES NEED STUDY SKILLS INSTRUCTION?

Everyone needs the right tools and training to do their job. A carpenter must bring hammers, saws, nails and drills and a working knowledge of how to handle wood in order to frame a house. A plumber needs the proper tools and experience to fix a kitchen sink. Study skills instruction gives students the "tools" and the "training" they need to do a good job in school. The more adept a student is with reading, writing, speaking and study skills, the more efficient and thorough he or she will be at getting the job of learning done. Too often, however, we move children through the grades without sufficient tools or training.

As students progress through each stage of education, they must develop a new set of skills to cope with greater demands. In the primary grades, they learn to read and write and organize themselves. From third to sixth grade, the emphasis switches to reading and writing to learn, and assumptions are made about how organized students should be at this point. In junior high school, students are expected to work more independently and to keep up with increasingly difficult schedules for school work, sports, activities, and social commitments. Upon entering high school and then college, even greater demands are placed on the student to process a more complex and increasing volume of material, and to complete more long-term assignments. The greater the demands of the grade level, the more need there is for study skills to cope with those demands.

Most teachers agree that study skills are important, but many are not really sure what study skillls are and whose responsibility it is to see that they are taught. College teacher-training and certification requirements usually do not include course work in the area of study skills. Curriculums are often quite detailed when it comes to content classes, and schools carefully examine these curriculums to detemine which reading series or textbooks they will use across the system. Not so with study skills; for too long it has been the Cinderella of curriculum planning. Most schools do not offer study skills instruction as part of the regular curriculum. There is often an assumption on the part of teachers and even parents that students have been taught these skills in previous grades or developed them on their own. Through no fault of their own, the higher the grade level, the less likely teachers are to include study skills instruction in lesson planning.

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In fact, many students are capable of developing their own systems for organizing, processing and comprehending what they have read or heard in class, planning homework and long-term assignments, studying for tests, and determining good test-taking strategies. Most students who complete college have never taken study skills classes, yet they have the intact learning processes to create the necessary organizational and study strategies to be successful in their college classes.

But what about the student with a learning disability? In his recent book, "Educational Care: A System for Understanding and Helping Children with Learning Problems" ((c) 1994, Educators Publishing Service, Cambridge, MA), Dr. Mel Levine presents a "phenomenological" model for describing a wide variety of learning difficulties. It is a model "based on clinical, educational, and research experience, a model that favors informed observation and description over labeling and that takes into account the great heterogeneity of children with disappointing school performance" (pg. 2). The model presents six major categories:

1. Phenomena related to weak attention controls (attention, processing, production and mental energy controls)

2. Phenomena related to reduced remembering (short and long-term memory)

3. Phenomena related to chronic misunderstanding (processing problems)

4. Phenomena related to deficient output (language production, motor performance, organization, problem solving and srategy use)

5. Phenomena related to delayed skills acquisition (reading, spelling, writing, mathematics)

6. Phenomena related to poor adaptation (social and motivation problems)

Any combination of these learning difficulties will affect a student's ability to self-design and independently apply study skills strategies. These students can learn study skills, but they need specific instruction, practice, and teachers who understand learning styles, strengths and weakesses. All students can benefit from study skills instruction. However, the difference between a student with a learning disability and one without is that although the latter certainly will benefit from such instruction, the student with a learning disability often cannot make it without this instruction.

A STUDY SKILLS MODEL

Through my teaching, supervising and administrative experience at Landmark School, I have developed, with the help of my colleagues, a flexible study skills model. It can be used in tutorials, resource rooms, skills classes and particularly in regular classrooms. Parts of this model can even be adapted by parents at home to help their children become more independent learners. The model begins with the development of organization strategies, including organization of materials, homework and long-term assignments; time-planning on a daily, weekly and monthly basis; and organization of study space. The model then presents main idea, notetaking, and summarizing skills which can be taught and practiced in grades four through high school. These basic skills then become the foundation for building textbook, test-preparation and test-taking skills. It also introduces the Landmark Master Notebook System, a collection of working, reference and reserve notebooks designed to enhance the application of study skills on a consistent basis. The

model has been presented to thousands of educators across the country through workshops at state and national conferences, on-site training at public and private schools, and through the seminars and teaching practicums sponsored by the Landmark Outreach Program. Teachers from primary grades to college level have adapted the model, and a number of school systems have done so on a system-wide basis. What follows is a summary of the first four skills of the Landmark Study Skills Model (L.S.S. Model).

Organization Skills

It is easy to assume that students, especially in the upper grades, have adequate organization skills. Yet many students do not know what supplies they should bring to class, how to use an assignment pad, or how to determine how long it will take to complete an assignment. Surprising as it may seem, some very bright teenagers do not even know how to use a calendar or a non-digital clock.

The L.S.S. Model provides a micro-united, structured plan for home and school work. Teachers should spend time in class to teach students how to set up notes and materials, use assignment pads, use long-term class calendars and personal weekly calendars, and organize study space. Teachers should also:

* Help students independently apply organization skills by explaining the rationale behind the skills

* Treat organization skills as part of the regular curriculum

* Model the use of calendars, assignment pads and homework time sheets in class

* Clearly state expectations for the application of organization strategies, and consistently check to see if students are meeting those expectations

* Organize and clearly explain all assignments and classwork to avoid confusion about what is required

Main Idea Skills

The ability to recognize and formulate main ideas is crucial for success in school, and in many ways it is a life skill. Supermarkets stock their products in the "main idea" sections of produce, bakery, dairy, etc. Books in the library are grouped into the "main ideas" of fiction, reference, non-fiction, etc. Even the nightly television news is presented in order of "main idea" segments such as national news, local news, sports, weather, and human interest stories.

Information in school that must be learned from textbooks, lectures, class discussions, and filmstrips can be categorized by main ideas to organize the material and make it more accessible to the student. A main idea can be the category for a list of items, the topic of a paragraph, the theme of an essay, the topic of a textbook chapter, or the thesis of a term paper. Main idea skills can be applied at a very basic categorizing level in the second or third grade; they can also be used to organize complex information from a college textbook. In lengthier material, main ideas can be listed in a hierarchy consisting of major and secondary main ideas.

The L.S.S. Model follows a four-step progression for introducing main idea skills:

* Categorizing lists of terms or new vocabulary

* Identifying and highlighting main ideas in paragraphs that have topic sentences

* Inferring main ideas in paragraphs that do not state the main idea and formulating them in the student's own words

* Identifying main ideas in multi-paragraph selections

Teachers should introduce main ideas using simple, structured material. As the student develops the skill, it should be practiced in more complex material from a variety of subject areas.

Note-Taking Skills

Notetaking is a procedure for recording information from lectures or reading in order to learn that information and retrieve it later to study. Notetaking is also a valuable tool for gathering and organizing pieces of research for a report. Taking notes encourages students to be more active learners by processing information and writing it in their own words. Given that notetaking requires the integration of listening, interpreting, sequencing and recording skills, it is easy to see why many students with learning disabilities feel overwhelmed when they must take notes. In some cases, they develop a fear of the task.

The two-column method of notetaking, in which main ideas are listed on the left side of a page and details on the right, is the best technique for introducing and developing notetaking skills. The L.S.S. Model introduces notetaking by following the same four-step progression used with main idea skills. Notetaking from lectures and other nonwritten material should be taught after the student can confidently take notes from written sources. Teachers should also be aware that some students need to develop notetaking sub-skills such as learning how to abbreviate, employing word economy, using visual markers, and editing notes.

Summarizing Skills

Summarizing helps students identify and organize the essence of the material they must learn. Sometimes there is so much information that students get lost in the details; constructing a summary enables them to see the greater picture. By searching for main ideas and relevant details, students become active readers and listeners. Reprocessing the information to produce a summary in their own words also provides practice for expressing that knowledge on a test or in class discussion.

Two-column notes can be used for the basis of a simple summary. The main ideas in the left column form an outline; the students turn these into sentences to write a summary. As with main idea skills, teachers should introduce summarizing using structured, simple material and progressing to lengthy, more complex material. Summarizing should also be practiced using a variety of subject matter; summaries from history material can be quite different than summaries from science material. Writing summaries from literary sources, such as short stories, is a good way to recall the key characters and sequence of events. Such a summary then becomes the basis of a book or story report. Consistently assigning students the task of summarizing notes, readings, and class lectures trains them to apply good review skills.

SUMMARY

While it is not a panacea for every academic problem, study skills instruction can improve the educational experience for students with learning disabilities and their teachers. With study skills intact, students become more confident, strengthen their memories, be organized, and have a plan of attack for textbook use, test-preparation and test-taking.

As the inclusive education movement takes hold across the country, study skills instruction gives teachers a tool for accommodating the diverse abilities and experiences of students in regular classrooms. Until recently, study skills were most likely to be taught in resource rooms and remedial classes, or be part of a student's individual I.E.P. One drawback of this approach is that it can sometimes be difficult for the student to carry-over and apply the skills in the regular classroom. For this reason, these students will benefit from study skills instruction which is incorporated into inclusive classrooms. The inclusion movement will also provide to many students who are not diagnosed as special needs the opportunity to become better students as special education teachers share their experience of skill training with content-oriented classroom teachers.

Joan Sedita has worked at Landmark School in Prides Crossing, MA since 1975 as a teacher, supervisor, and program director. She is currently Director of the Landmark Outreach Training Program. She has presented study skills workshops at numerous state and national conferences, to faculties at public and private schools, and to parent groups. Through a grant provided by the State Street Bank Foundation, she will be introducing the Landmark Study Skills Model to the Boston Public Schools. Ms. Sedita is also the author of the Landmark Study Skills Guide, a book for teachers and parents which describes the study skills model in detail. This book may be ordered by sending $15.00 (plus 5% MA tax and $2.00 for s&h) to the Landmark Outreach Program, P.O.Box 227, Prides Crossing, MA 01965. Phone: (508) 927-4440.